



Conversation Analysis in Cross-Culture Team Communication

ANALYSE DE LA CONVERSATION DANS LA COMMUNICATION D'ÉQUIPE D'INTERCULTURELLE

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Abstract

With the development and intensification of globalization, people who are studying or working in a multicultural background become popular. Studies have demonstrated that team composition may influence the team to obtain success, and prevent them from reaching its potential performance. In other words, team composition has a direct effect on team's performance. The paper studies the team composed of Chinese undergraduate students and Belarusians graduate students who are studying at Dalian University of Technology. We adopt discourse analysis method in the research. We let the participants attend meetings which are designed to reveal their communication patterns, and then we recorded the meetings, transcribed and coded. And the communication patterns of each group and how the patterns changed when participants changed from being a majority to a minority in a group were studied. At last, the study provides some guidance and application for those who are involved in relative fields. Our study shows that generally speaking, Belarusians participants contributed and participated more than Chinese participants did. Moreover, there are differences between our Chinese and Belarusian participants in communication styles when they work in mixed groups. Chinese students tend to diverge in their conversational patterns when they changed from being a majority to a minority in a group. However, Belarusian participants incline to converge in their conversational patterns when they changed from being a majority to a

minority in a group.

Key words: Discourse analysis; Intercultural communication; Group communication; Group decision meeting; Communication accommodation theory

Résumé

Avec le développement et l'intensification de la mondialisation, les gens qui étudient ou travaillent dans un contexte multiculturel sont devenu populaire. Des études ont démontré que la composition des équipes peut influencer l'équipe pour obtenir le succès, et les empêcher d'atteindre son potentiel de performance. En d'autres termes, la composition des équipes a un effet direct sur la performance de l'équipe. Le document étudie l'équipe composée de Chinois étudiants de premier cycle et les Biélorusses étudiants qui étudient à l'Université de Technologie de Dalian. Nous adoptons la méthode d'analyse du discours dans la recherche. Nous avons laissé les participants assistent à des réunions qui sont conçus pour révéler leurs modes de communication, puis nous avons enregistré les réunions, transcrites et codées. Et les modèles de communication de chaque groupe et la façon dont les schémas a changé lorsque les participants d'être changé une majorité à une minorité dans un groupe ont été étudiés. Enfin, l'étude fournit des indications et d'application pour ceux qui sont impliqués dans des domaines relatifs. Notre étude montre que de façon générale, les participants ont contribué et participé Biélorusses plus de participants chinois ont fait. Par ailleurs, il existe des différences entre nos participants chinois et biélorusses dans les styles de communication quand ils travaillent dans des groupes mixtes. Les étudiants chinois ont tendance à diverger dans leurs habitudes de conversation quand ils ont changé d'être une majorité à une minorité dans un groupe. Toutefois, les participants biélorusses incliné à converger dans leurs habitudes de conversation quand ils ont changé d'être une

majorité à une minorité dans un groupe.

Mots-clés: Analyse du discours; La communication interculturelle; La communication de groupe; Réunion de décision en groupe; La théorie de la communication d'hébergement

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INTRODUCTION

Research Background

With the development of the global economy, multicultural work teams are becoming more and more common, and English becomes the dominant language in a multicultural work teams. The growing body of intercultural research suggests that the differences in teamwork across cultures and points to the complexity of culturally diverse teams. Studies have shown that the composition of the team determines the success of the group and may prevent the group from reaching its performance potential. (Earley & Gibson, 2002; Earley & Mosakoski, 2000; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Ravlin, Thomas, & Ilsev, 2000). Studies on culturally diverse teams demonstrate that moderately heterogeneous groups experience significant communication problems, relational conflicts, and low team identity that have a dysfunctional impact on team effectiveness (Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997). As a rule, heterogeneous teams report reduced satisfaction with the team, which, in turn, negatively affects team performance (Earley & Mosakoski, 2000; Jehn et al., 1999;

Ravlin et al., 2000). Although previous studies suggest important differences in teamwork across cultures, they do not adequately address the complexity of issues affecting culturally diverse teams and do not identify the specific factors that contribute to these differences (Earley & Gibson, 2002).

Research Objective

The aim of the paper is to explore the differences in the contribution and participation patterns of China-born speakers and those from Belarus in heterogeneous groups on a basis of a comparison of discussions designed to investigate the individual communications styles in a multicultural background. And the paper discusses implication for managing and training intercultural teams and outlines directions for future research. The paper also offers some guidance for those who manage, communicate in different cultural groups so that they could understand how to better communicate with others in multicultural teams.

Research questions

1) Are there significant difference in the participation and contribution patterns of native Chinese speakers and those from the cultures of individualism in heterogeneous groups?

2) Does team composition have an effect on the participation and contribution of speakers of Belarus-born speakers and native Chinese speaker from the Asian?

3) How does participation and contribution styles change when native Chinese speaker speak as a majority versus their conversational style when they belong to a minority in intercultural teams that also composed of native Chinese speakers and the speakers from the cultures of individualism?

4) How does participation and contribution styles change when Belarus-born speakers are in a majority versus their discourse style when they belong to a minority in intercultural teams that are also made up of Belarus-born speakers and native Chinese speakers?

1. METHODOLOGY

We analyzed the meetings across groups of different culture backgrounds, in particular, teams made up of China-born English speaker and the Belarus counterparts. We used IA and to track members interaction using six variables. In order to measure member contribution, we tracked the number of turns taken by participants, the number of words spoken, and the average turn length. And we use another three variables to track member participation, which is the number of overlap, backchannels, and latching. The transcript was coded for analysis of the six variables. Turn-taking is defined as moves that involve interchange of talking by speakers. And many studies have shown that turn-taking styles are culture specific, and lead to many communication problems. Culture preference for pause between turns, length of turns, simultaneous talk, or discrete talk, all of these will result in communication difficulties. (Du-Babcock, 2006; FitzGerald, 2003). The analysis of Southeast Asians' conversational style revealed that they are not successful in turn maintenance when competing with Europeans (Clyne, 1994). Du-Babcock (1999) found that meetings of multinational groups conducted in English were characterized by linear patterns of communication (distinct phases and predetermined sequence of turns) whereas meetings conducted in Cantonese were characterized by circular patterns (nondistinct phases and random turns).

We measured contribution by looking at the number of words spoken. We chose to use number of words spoken instead of the length of time that a speaker spoke, which many other studies chose, because we think it is a better indicator of a speaker's contribution. Most of our speakers are not native English speaker, so it will take more time

for them to structure their sentences, comprehending the information. In addition, due to language proficiency, speakers are usually confronted with pause and interval when they speak English, which will prolong the time that the speaker speaks. What's more, speaker's time may vary between those who relatively speak fast and those who speak slowly, even if when they use their native language.

Turn length was used as another variable to measure a speaker's contribution. Previous studies have pointed out that cultural differences lead to the difference of turn length. Clyne (1994) found a strong correlation between turn length and cultural groups. We measured a speaker's average turn length by dividing the numbers of words that speakers spoke by the numbers of turns that speakers took.

We measured a speaker's participation by looking at its turn-taking strategies which are overlaps, backchannels, and latching. Turn-taking is investigated to look at the shape of the turn-taking organization device and how it affects the distribution of turns for the activities on which it operates. Turn-taking is concerned with when and how speakers take turns, or choose their pauses. And different types of conversation will present different features of conversations. Then, the turn-taking strategies we choose to measure a speaker's participation are overlaps, backchannels, and latching, which we think are representatives of turn-taking strategies. Then, what is overlap? Overlap is defined as periods when speakers talk at the same time and the contribution of one speaker overlaps with that of another. We divided overlap into two categories: cooperative overlaps, uncooperative overlaps, or interruption. Cooperative overlap is defined as without changing the current topic, and the speakers continue to elaborate on the current one. Overlaps in conversations are generally considered as high involvement conversation styles and may be regarded as aggressive, fast-talking, and mark instances of disagreement, urgency, and annoyance, or a high degree of competition for a turn by other culture groups. (Tannen, 1990). The term high involvement (Tannen, 1990) refer to the speaking style that gives priority to showing enthusiasm. In contrast, high considerateness gives priority to showing concern and consideration for others. Research has demonstrated that these two conversational styles lead to people's different values and principles from different cultural backgrounds, for example, Spanish, Greeks, Russians use high involvement conversation style which is regarded as aggressive by other cultural groups because they frequently use conversational overlaps and interruptions.

We tracked the use of backchannels. Backchanneling means that the hearer shows attention to the speaker, indicating that the hearer is still listening. It is intended to keep the communication going by confirming or reacting to the previous statement. (Clyne, 1994). And some researchers regard backchanneling as positive interruption. Backchannels usually appears like "alright", "I see", "uh",

"yeah".

Last, we tracked latching to measure a speaker's participation. Latching is defined as a speaker begins speaking without any noticeable pause (Tannen, 1990). High considerateness style speakers regard latching as intrusive, but high-involvement speakers usually don't feel uncomfortable or annoyed, when they are confronted with it.

2. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Our data set is made up of transcripts of recordings of small group decision-making meetings. The people who are chosen to participate in the simulation are the undergraduate students who are mainly China-born and majoring in English and the graduate students who are most from France and Belarus, and now are studying at Dalian University of Technology.

There are two groups in our sample. Both groups were composed of 9 people, who are randomly assigned. In the sample, one group is composed of a majority of the Belarusians and French, and a minority of China-born Speakers. And another group was made up of a majority of Chinese people and a minority of Belarusians. In both groups, a majority consisted of about eight members of one cultural group with a minority being one or two members of the other cultural group. The research was done in English, although all the participants were not native English speakers, they all can communicate fluently in English, and all of them have been studying English for over 10 years.

The simulation used in the study is to choose the possible survivors for a new civilization. A nuclear war has just taken place, all the world will be destroyed by radiation except an uninhabited island 300 miles off the coast of Australia. Scientists think that the plants on the island will be damaged, but the soil will not be ruined. Each participant could only choose six out of ten possible survivors who are holding different positions and jobs to get on the plane, because besides the pilot, the plane can only carry six people. So, not all the possible survivor could get on the plane, some of them were abandoned. Above all, all the participants need to make their decisions on the basis of starting a new civilization. The participants worked in groups of 9 and tried to reach a group consensus. The meetings last 30-40 minutes in length and were recorded in a quiet classroom. The meetings were held in English, and were recorded then transcribed.

The transcripts were coded for analysis in six areas: number of turns taken, number of words spoken, average turn length, number of conversational overlaps, number of interruption, number of backchannels, and frequency of latching.

Since all the participants whose native languages were not English, we chose those who had studied English for over 10 years, most of which can spoke English fluently

and communicate effectively in English. And thus to most degree, reduces the issues of low language proficiency which may have a great impact on the results of the research.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We get the statistic figures of number of turns, number of words, number of conversational overlap, number of backchannels, number of latching by counting them. Then, we calculate the absolute difference of the six variables, respectively, to see how largely they differ between the Chinese Speakers and Belarusian Speakers, and how largely they differ, when Chinese Speakers and Belarus Speakers changed from majority group to minority group. And additionally, we adopt the Percentage Difference which is illustrated in the following tables. The reason why we choose the Percentage Difference is that only Absolute Difference cannot accurately describe the disparity between the statistics. For example, 10 is relatively large when the base (explained in the following tables) is 20, however, 10 is relatively small when the base is 100. Both statistics are 10, but the extent of difference is different. The Percentage Difference can describe the degree difference, even when the differences are same.

To answer Research Question 1), we compared the communication patterns of China-born speakers and Belarus-born speaker working in mixed groups. This analysis compared all the Chinese participants with Belarus counterparts, regardless of the group composition.

Table 1 shows a comparison of discourse styles between these two cultural groups. The first three items in the table (turns, words, turn length) were used to examine speakers' contribution, and the last three items (overlap, latching, backchannel) were used to measure speakers' participation. And the difference aims to indicate to what degree the two cultural groups differ from each other in participation and contribution.

As the Table 1 indicates, differences are statistically significant. Generally speaking, The Belarus English Speakers were contributing more than the Chinese English Speakers in all the six areas except the area of backchannel. In other words, concerning the Research Question 1), significant differences existed in the contribution and participation patterns used by the two participant groups.

Additionally, we want to see what effect team composition had on a cultural group. To answer Research Question 3) and 4), we separately track each group's performance including contribution and participation as changing from being a majority in the group to become a minority in a group.

Table 2 shows a comparison of Chinese English Speakers in heterogeneous groups as they moved from being a majority to a minority in a group.

As Tables 2 shows, clear difference existed when

Chinese English speakers moved from being a majority to a minority in the group, especially in the area of turn length, overlap, and backchannel. Both of them largely decreased when they became the majority. The turn length decreased, indicating that the contribution of the participants increased. However, the sharp downfall in backchannel demonstrated that the participation decreased sharply when Chinese English speaker moved from a minority to majority. The reason may be attributed to the team composition. When teams were composed of majority of Chinese, the culture of the teams belonged to high consideration communication patterns which gives the priority to the consideration of others but not imposing (Tannen, 1990). There was slightly increase in the number of turns that the speaks took, and a little decrease occurred in the area of words spoken, and the latching changed from 1 to 0.5 when they moved from a majority to a minority in a group, on one hand, the number demonstrating that Chinese groups seldom do latching when they were communicating to others. On the other hand, these differences showed that the Chinese participants do not maintain their communication behaviors but diverge (using the language of CAT) in terms of their participation patterns as the group composition changes. When Chinese speakers were in minority, they participated more in terms of overlaps and backchannels, which were 3 and 11.5 average person, much higher than 1.8671 and 2.714285 compared with the numbers of being in majority in a group, which was a sign of using the language of CAT, adapting their communication styles to the ones of Belarus.

Table 3 shows a similar comparison of Belarus speakers when they moved from being a majority to a minority in a group in all six areas. As previous tables show, the first three items in the table indicate the contribution, whereas the last three indicate participation.

Generally speaking, Belarusians contributed much more and participated more actively when they stayed in a team composed of a majority of Belarusians. However, in contrast to Chinese, significant differences emerged when Belarus moved from being a majority to a minority in a group. As shown in table 3, the number of turns decreased sharply from average of 20.5 to 6, the same as words spoken, overlap, latching, backchannels, dropping from 570.125 to 340, 6.5 to 3, 1.75 to 0, 4.75 to 1, respectively, and turn length increased from 29.605 to 56.667. Belarusian groups produced fewer words and took fewer turns, latching diminished when they belonged to a minority in a group, and their participation also clearly decreased with fewer overlaps, latching and backchannels. From the statistic in table 3, we could see that the contribution and participation of the Belarus diverged when the teams composition changed, they also used the language of CAT to adopt their communication patterns, which they acted the same as Chinese speakers.

Table 1
A Comparison of China-Born English Speakers and Belarusians Across all Groups

Category	Chinese and Belarusians English Speaker Across All Groups			
Variables	Average of Chinese English Speakers	Average of Belarusians English Speakers	Absolute Difference	*Percentage Difference
Turns	7	13.25	6.26	0.894286
Words	296.2857	455.5625	159.2768	0.53758
Turn length	36.61224	34.382075	2.230165	0.064864
Overlap	2.43355	4.75	2.31645	0.95188
Latching	0.75	0.875	0.125	0.16667
Backchannel	7.1071425	2.875	4.2321425	1.47205

*Notes: Percentage Difference = Absolute Differences / Base, Base is the value of *Average of Chinese English Speakers* or *Average of Belarusians English Speakers*, which is smaller.

Table 2
A Comparison of Chinese English Speakers only Across all Groups

Category	Chinese English Speakers Across All Groups			
Variables	Average in Minority group	Average in Majority group	Absolute Difference	*Percentage Difference
Turns	8	10.1428	2.1428	0.26785
Words	326	266.5714	59.4286	0.2229369
Turn length	40.84	26.2818	14.5582	0.553927
Overlap	3	1.8671	1.1329	0.07118
Latching	0.5	1	0.5	1
Backchannel	11.5	2.714285	8.785715	3.23684

*Notes: Percentage Difference = Absolute Differences / Base, Base is the value of *Average in minority group* or *Average in Majority group*, which is smaller.

Table 3
A Comparison of Belarusians English Speakers Across all Groups

Category	Belarusians English Speakers Across All Groups			
Variables	Average in Minority group	Average in Majority group	Absolute Difference	*Percentage Difference
Turns	6	20.5	14.5	2.41667
Words	340	570.125	230.125	0.67684
Turn length	56.667	29.605	27.062	0.91410
Overlap	3	6.5	3.5	1.16667
Latching	0	1.75	1.75	
Backchannel	1	4.75	3.75	3.75

*Notes: Percentage Difference = Absolute Differences / Base, Base is the value of *Average in minority group* or *Average in Majority group*, which is smaller

From the three tables, we can see that Chinese belong to the high considerateness communication pattern which gives priority to showing consideration of others in communicative situations, while Belarusians' communication styles are the high involvement which gives priority to involvement to the communication situations.

And generally, Asian culture belongs to collectivist cultures, like Chinese, which are instances of considerateness style, whereas Western individualistic cultures, like Belarus, tend to exhibit high involvement style.

Table 4
A Comparison of Backchannel Signals Between Chinese and Belarusians Across all groups

Category	Backchannel signals between Chinese and Belarusians Across All Groups			
Types	Chinese Participants	Belarusians Participants	Total	Percentage
All Right	8	2	10	0.12048
En	13	4	17	0.20482
Yeah	12	16	28	0.33735
OK	1	6	7	0.08434
Yes	1	5	6	0.07229
Oh		4	4	0.09639
Sentences	5	6	11	0.13253
All	40	43	83	

We further investigated the backchannels. We divided Backchannels into 7 types, and they were “All Right”, “En”, “Yeah”, “OK”, “Yes”, “Oh”, and Sentences that indicated backchannels. We compared the Backchannels that all Chinese and Belarusians used, and the results were shown in Table 4. From Table 4, from an overall point of view, “Yeah” was the most frequently used type of backchannel between Chinese and Belarusians across all groups, accounting for about 34 percent, followed by “En”, which occupied around 20 percent. “Yes” was the least used in both groups, which only accounted for 7 percent.

From the Table, it is clearly seen that Belarusians and Chinese adopt different words, or strategies that signaled they were still listening to the speakers. Among all the types of Backchannels, “En” was the most frequently used backchannel signals among Chinese participants which occurred 13 times. By contrast, it was observed only 4 times among Belarusians in the meetings. Besides “En”, “Yeah” was another frequently used type of backchannel among Chinese group, which occurred 12 times. The third type of backchannel that Chinese participants like to use was “All Right”, “Oh” was the least used backchannel signals among Chinese participants, No “Oh” was used among Chinese participants in our studies, and however, it occurred 4 times among Belarusians participants. “OK” and “Yes” were also seldom used among Chinese participants to indicate that they were still listening to the speakers, only 1 times was observed in both types among Chinese participants.

Among Belarusians participants, “Yeah” was the most frequently-used method to express their attention to speakers, which occurred 16 times, far beyond other types of Backchannels. Other types of Backchannel, such as “En”, “OK”, “Yes”, “Oh” and sentences that signaled backchannels were almost the same in terms of frequency. However, “All Right” was the least types of backchannel that Belarusians used to show their attention to speakers, and only 2 times were observed in our studies.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Conclusions

In conclusion, our studies indicate that there are differences in communication style between the two groups of participants in our study when they work in mixed groups. Our studies suggest that group composition have an effect on communication patterns as our participants moved from being a majority to a minority in a group. Our findings support those in the area of intercultural research that looked at people from collectivists cultures in contrast with individualistic cultures, which found that collectivists are more likely to diverge their communication patterns from out-group interlocutors individualists (Gallois, Ogay, & Giles, 1995). Additionally, our findings also support the proposition

that individualists will converge linguistically toward collective groups. (Gallois et al., 1995) as shown in table 3, Belarus participant spoke less and took few turns in terms of contribution, when the Belarus participant was surrounded by a majority of Chinese in a group. With regard to participation, all of the three variables, overlaps, latching, and backchannels, decreased as Belarus participant was in a majority of Chinese group, known as collective groups. And this tendency demonstrates the proposition that individualists, which is the Belarus in our study, converge linguistically toward collective groups which is the Chinese groups in this study.

These findings may be explained as another aspect of CAT that was developed to resolve the tension between the cognitive goals of communication effectiveness. Convergence may be explained by the cognitive goal of facilitating comprehension and affective goals of evoking listener’s social approval. And Divergence can be explained by the cognitive goal to encourage the listener to adopt a more situationally appropriate speech pattern and the affective goal to emphasize distinctiveness and in turn to reinforce a positive sense of identity. In other words, the Chinese participants as they became a minority in a group, the divergence we observed in a communication patters might be explained by another aspect of CAT, the affective function of identity maintenance. In other words, Chinese groups which belong to the Asian cultures diverge from Belarusian speakers’ characteristics and emphasize distinctiveness and thus reinforce their positive sense of identity. Additionally, this divergence encourages the listeners to adopt a more situationally appropriate speech pattern. A situationally appropriate speech pattern may depend on the location of communication pattern, which means that the Chinese participants encourage the Belarus participants to use the communication patterns in China based on the assumption that it is a more appropriate pattern for the situation. According to CAT, this is explained by their collectivist value orientation.

As opposed to divergence, convergence occurred in our research. The Belarusian converged in her communication styles when she was in a majority of Chinese groups, which might be explained by cognitive goals of facilitating comprehension and affective goals of evoking listener’s social approval. The convergence of communication styles, on one hand, improves the effectiveness of communication, on the other hand, evokes social approval by Chinese groups.

4.2 Implications

Our studies provide a more detailed way of looking at communication between the two cultural groups, one that recognizes the potential effect of language or lingua franca in determining the Chinese and Belarusian communication pattern and at the same time, revealing another aspect of accommodation that may explain the Chinese diverging linguistic style when the two groups are working together

on a single task.

This study has implications for those who are engaged in managing, training, working or teaching heterogeneous groups composed of members from Chinese and Belarus. Managers, trainers, workers and teachers need to make Chinese aware of their own communication patterns. And also they need to be educated about particular conversational behaviors that characterize this style.

Similarly, Belarusian English Speakers need to be educated about the importance of in-group status for collectivist culture may attempt to preserve their own communication pattern and their group identity, a desire that impedes effective communication. And also by helping the two groups of people understand each other's conversational styles, they tend to achieve more effective communication and learn to evoke social approval.

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